

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

The Olympic Boycott 1980

In 1980, the United States led a boycott of the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow to protest the late 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In total, 65 nations refused to participate in the games, whereas 80 countries sent athletes to compete.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on December 27, 1979, the international community broadly condemned the action. Advisors to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev claimed that the intervention would be quick and uncontested and suggested that U.S. President Jimmy Carter was too engrossed in the ongoing hostage crisis in Iran to respond to the situation in Kabul. In reality, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan led to an extended conflict in Central Asia, and Carter reacted with a series of measures designed to place pressure on the Soviets to withdraw. These measures included the threat of a grain embargo, the withdrawal of the SALT II agreement from Senate consideration, and a possible boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics, scheduled to be hosted by Moscow.

In early 1980, the movement toward either boycotting the games altogether or moving them out of the Soviet Union gained momentum. Calls for boycotts of Olympic events were not uncommon; just four years prior, most of the nations of Sub-Saharan Africa boycotted the Summer Games in Montreal to protest the attendance of New Zealand after the latter sent its rugby team to play against the team from apartheid South Africa. In 1956, several Western European governments boycotted the games in Melbourne over the Soviet invasion of Hungary that year. Although the Olympic ideal was to place sport above politics, in reality there were often political goals and messages promoted through the games.

Western governments first considered the idea of boycotting the Moscow Olympics in response to the situation in Afghanistan at the December 30, 1979 meeting of NATO representatives, although at that time, not many of the governments were interested in the proposal. The idea gained popularity, however, when Russian dissident Andrei Sakharov called for a boycott in early January. On January 14, 1980, the Carter Administration joined Sakharov by setting a deadline by which the Soviet Union must pull out of Afghanistan or face consequences including an international boycott of the games. When the deadline passed a month later without any change to the situation in Central Asia, Carter pushed U.S. allies to pull their Olympic teams from the upcoming games.

International support for the boycott varied. Great Britain and Australia were the strongest allies to join the United States in calling for the boycott, although in the end both countries ended up sending athletes to the games. To try to build support for the boycott in Africa, Carter sent American boxer Mohammad Ali on a goodwill tour through the continent to persuade African governments to join. The trip backfired, however, when Ali himself was talked out of his support of the boycott during the course of his meetings. In the end, the closest U.S. allies to join the movement against the Moscow games were Canada, West Germany and Israel. Most of the Islamic nations also joined the boycott, although Afghanistan itself sent eleven athletes to compete. Other nations refusing to send teams to Moscow included Chile, Haiti, Honduras, Paraguay, South Korea, and the People's Republic of China. Some nations that did not attend the games in Moscow did so for reasons other than the boycott, such as financial constraints.

Within the United States, there was public support for the boycott. The U.S. House of Representatives passed a nonbinding resolution approving the decision to stay away from Moscow with a vote of 386 in favor and 12

opposed; the U.S. Senate passed a similar measure with a vote of 88 to 4. Technically, the decision of whether or not to send athletes to the Olympic Games does not actually rest with either the President or the Congress, however; it is the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) that makes the final determination in such a situation. In the face of such broad support, however, the USOC expressed its willingness to respect the decision of the U.S. Government with regard to the games. While some nations chose to express their displeasure with Soviet military actions by not sending formal teams to compete, but also not preventing individual athletes from attending and competing under the Olympic flag, athletes in the United States were warned that travel to Moscow for the games would result in them being stripped of their passports. In protest, a group of 25 American athletes sued the U.S. Government over the boycott seeking permission to compete, but they lost their case.

In organizing the boycott and rallying support behind it, the Carter Administration had wanted to express the extent of international displeasure with the invasion of Afghanistan, and to pressure the Soviets to pull their armies out of the conflict. In actuality, the Soviet-Afghan War continued and did not end until 1989, and the Soviets reacted to the boycott by retaliating and leading a communist-bloc boycott of the 1984 Summer Olympic Games held in Los Angeles. These Olympic boycotts were just one manifestation of the cooling relations between the United States and the Soviet Union in the early 1980s.

<http://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/Olympic>